

CHURCH CELEBRATIONS AND IDENTITY IN A NORTH  
HUNGARIAN VILLAGE

Village life in general has suffered from continuous internal tension and unceasing external influences, particularly since World War II. The efforts of present and former villagers to counterbalance these disruptive processes are most evident in the sphere of religious rituals. Attempts to combine selected and frequently transformed traditional cultural elements with new or transitional ones are evident in Church folk customs.

A diachronic review of these serves three interrelated functions. First, it reveals a selective traditionalization and a creative innovation of customs amidst social change. The conservative influence of village traditions, whether presumed or actual, may be observed through the examination of these customs. At the same time, some of the most revolutionary, indigenous inventions may be noted in this area as village life, values, and world views become increasingly secularized and oriented towards material accumulation and conspicuous consumption. Second, the brief survey of various customs and religious celebrations demonstrates various activities in, and mobilization of, social networks within and beyond Cserépfalu. Some customs involve sumptuous feasts, visits, and gift giving as integral parts of the villagers' observation, while in the case of seemingly obsolete customs, only limited activities within a narrow circle of kin, fictive-kin, and neighbors remain. Third, this brief review illustrates how a distinct local identity is expressed through emphases on belonging and continuity in these highly condensed and clearly articulated events.

The village patron saint's day (*búcsú*), a Roman Catholic custom, is an interesting phenomenon in this predominantly Calvinist settlement. For only the past forty years, the celebration has been held in Cserépfalu on the nearest weekend to József name day, March 19, the anniversary of the 1944 consecration of the small Roman Catholic chapel in Cserépfalu. While the initial event and the annual celebration are mentioned with disdain by most older and middle-aged villagers, nearly everyone

attends this decidedly secular happening. People from nearby settlements come as well, and some former villagers visit. Gypsy musicians from Mezőkövesd play in the village tavern on this occasion. For two days the center of Cserépfalu looks and sounds like an amusement park: A carousel, surrounded by 25 to 30 stands where vendors from all over the region sell small gifts (*búcsúfia*) currently made mostly of plastic in Hong Kong, a couple of shooting galleries, and a makeshift bar offering beer, wine, and fruit brandy are the focal points.

With the exception of children and young villagers, everybody complains about this celebration. The main topics are illustrated by the following: „All these vagrants infest the village and we lose money; they make money on us. The [village] Council ought not to allow them in; they should not get a permit”; „We have to clean, paint, and whitewash our houses a week before, so that they see how clean Cserépfalu is, and then they turn the village upside down, even throw up in the ditch on main street in broad daylight.” In particular, women complain about the cooking and baking, the costly shopping, and the tiring preparations with which they get ready for visiting ex-villagers and acquaintances from nearby settlements. Former villagers, who have returned every year and participated in the event for the past 10 or 15 or 20 years, protested when asked if, by chance, the event plays a part in their visits at that precise time each year. Village elite, who also attend with their children and grandchildren, repeatedly expressed negative feelings about this „senseless circus, which costs us money” or „which forced us to call in a couple of policemen from [Mezőkövesd or Bogács] because our two volunteer policemen could not control the crowd of strangers”, and so on.

Nevertheless, this relatively recent custom has multiple significance. It is the only time of the year when large groups of strangers purposefully come to and stay in the village and interact with natives on home territory. Feelings and expressions of Cserépfalu identity are magnified and clearly articulated in this context. Neighboring villagers, who are usually referred to either by the warm name of „my landsman” (*fődim*) when traveling abroad or called by various, pejorative yet joking bynames when met in the nearby market or medical clinics, suddenly become „vagrants” trespassing irreverently in Cserépfalu. The village, ordinarily a very quiet place with well-known, familiar faces and highly predictable occurrences, suddenly becomes, for the two days of the patron saint's day celebration, very, noisy, filled with unknown people and chaotic, confusing, mostly unpredictable happenings. This is the primary reason behind the clearly expressed, very negative sentiments about the celebration in Cserépfalu. At the same time, many of the villagers never miss attending

and enjoying the patron saints' days at the nearby settlements of Bogács, Bükkszerc, and Szomolya.

In sum, this annual event in Cserépfalu became a very significant, although much criticized, local custom in which face-to-face interactions of villagers with non-villagers takes place on the „home turf.” The display and manifestation of an emphasized Cserépfalu identity are evident in the villagers' preparations for, participation in, and opinions about patron saint's day.

Even though both Carnival and Easter, in some sense, contain the spirit of revival, the promise of spring, freedom, and fun, Easter customs are very different in character and retain many traditional elements in Cserépfalu. In spite of the statement of older and middleaged villagers that neither [Carnival or Easter] are what they used to be or should be, Easter customs remain meaningful for all age groups on both Easter Sunday and Easter Monday. The formal activities and behaviors that are evident several days before Easter — painting, whitewashing and cleaning houses, cooking, baking, preparing noodles in small groups, sewing, and extravagant shopping — help to elevate and express the importance and high-holiday characteristics of the subsequent event.

A large number of former villagers return and spend both days of Easter in Cserépfalu with kin. Coming home for Easter, as former villagers stated, is in itself an important tradition; without it, Easter would not be Easter. In a number of cases, former villagers exchange letters with one another weeks before the holiday and stage a more or less formal reunion in Cserépfalu on Easter Monday. The women stay at home with their mothers or mothers-in-law. The men go to wine cellars in groups „just like when we were young bachelors, living at home”.

On Easter Sunday many villagers and former villagers attend church services and partake in Holy Communion. At noon big, sumptuous, „traditional” family feasts are served. The food is similar to all local special-occasion meals: soup with homemade noodles, pork dishes, chicken dishes, potatoes, baked sweets, wine, and soft drinks (various carbonated drinks which are indiscriminantly called *kóla*). Villagers presume this to be the traditional holiday meal and claim it is locally specific. However, older informants recall having much simpler, less costly, and considerably less ample holiday and special-occasion meals in the past. Traditionally, soup with homemade noodles has „always” been served on these special occasions, but fewer courses followed, fancy baked goods were absent, and soft-drinks were not used in the village until the early 1970s.

The second day of Easter contains key elements of the pre-courting and courting relationships of village youth, along with the more explicit romantic relations between marriageable men and women. Based on age

and kin and fictive-kin ties, groups of two to six boys or men go together and sprinkle most women with cologne. Traditionally, water was used and only young, unmarried women were sprinkled (actually drenched with buckets full of cold water in the streets or in yards). As an old village woman proudly recalled, „I was so popular that I had to change clothes six or seven times on Easter Mondays! I even got pneumonia one year I was so *kapós*” (in this sense: wanted, desired).

Currently, women of all ages get sprinkled on their heads, shoulders, and chest with cologne by all visiting boys and men. The focus, however, is on young girls and marriageable women. Mothers, grandmothers, and other female kin are ever present during the sprinkling of unmarried girls by bachelors. However, the older women disappear for a time (vaguely claiming that a chore must be done elsewhere) when a young man of *their* choice appears with a group. Once the women have left, the group continues to eat and drink, talk and joke among themselves. The young woman of the house talks with, and evades (not too vigorously) the sudden explicitly sexual attentions of the favored young man. The others stay in the room, but pretend not to notice the kissing and grabbing or the attempts of their kin at sprinkling cologne directly on the breasts or under the skirt of the girl. Bottles of seltzer-water are always present at these occasions and are used by the particular suitor to aim and squirt at the breasts and genitalia of the girl, preferably down the bodice and up the skirt of her dress. The mother and older female kin reappear in 15 or 20 minutes, and these games are discontinued as soon as the gate or doors squeak. Everybody present acts as if nothing has happened. While the group of men is present, no mention is made of the puddles or the wet and disarrayed clothes of the young woman. Food and drinks are offered, and talking, joking, and laughter continue until the group leaves or the next group of boys or men arrives.

These Easter Monday visiting-sprinkling episodes begin around eight o'clock in the morning and end around two in the afternoon. By that time most village males, 14 years and older, are very drunk and go home, or to the local inn, or to wine cellars, or to a speakeasy. The women lock their gates, draw the curtains, roll down the blinds, and ignore the few late-coming groups of evidently drunk men trying to get in, unless the latter belong to the household.

Young women keep a careful count of how many sprinklers come each Easter Monday. They compare this and compete about it; mothers and grandmothers brag among themselves of the attention their daughters and granddaughters have received.

Very young boys, up to the age of about six years, are accompanied by the father, godfather, and uncles and recite a short poem while they

sprinkle the girls and women. In exchange they get candy and money. Boys up to the age of about 14 years also get money gifts from the sprinkled women on these occasions. Sons of kin, fictive-kin, neighbors, and those „who did any kind of favor us” get considerably more money than „just village kids.” Gypsy children, accompanied by Gypsy women, walk over from neighboring Bogács. They enter the yards, but not the houses, of villagers, sing a song at the doorway, and receive food, candy, and small money gifts, quite unlike on ordinary occasions, when Gypsies are chased away more often than not.

Offering food and drinks to the sprinkling boys and men and giving dyed eggs to a few special bachelors are important parts of the Easter Monday ceremony. These were present, although on a smaller scale, traditionally. Giving money to boys, however, is a relatively recent addition, one that began in the early 1970s.

In summary, Easter customs in Cserépfalu retain some selected traditional elements which exist side by side with some transitional and novel additions. The preparations for this holiday are traditional or quasi-traditional, as are going to church services and taking Holy Communion, special family feasts with special foods, the age graded grouping of village males for the mostly implicit sexual displays of sprinkling women, and the presentation of food and drinks during these visits. Transitional elements include the replacement of water with cologne and the overt manifestations of courting. The latter is a continuation, although transformed and in a highly condensed form, of local traditional courting patterns. The new additions include the return of former villagers and money gifts to boys. Coming home for both days of Easter not only strengthens family and kin relations but also expresses the former villagers adherence to Cserépfalu and explicitly serves to maintain ties between former classmates within various age-groups. Overall, Easter customs contain selective traditionalizations and innovations, evident activities and mobilization of intra-village and extra-village social networks, and they show articulated emphases of local and familial identities of present and former villagers.

Whitsuntide, observed fifty days after Easter, was the most significant two-day event after Christmas and Easter in the village until the mid 1950s. Like other informants over the age of 45, one 68-years-old woman recalled that the family was always together on Whitsuntide Sunday and Monday. Even the men came home from the lime-kilns; only the most important chores were performed around the animals between Saturday evening and Monday evening. Everybody went to church on both days and took Holy Communion.

In 1983 approximately nine percent of the villagers attended Whitsuntide Sunday church services and less than five percent attended these on Monday. Officially, Whitsuntide has not been recognized as a holiday since 1949, therefore, people go to work and children attend school on Whitsuntide Monday. Until the late 1950s some mothers and grandmothers kept schoolchildren at home. When the children were reprimanded by school officials for truancy, the mothers insisted, both verbally and in writing, that Whitsuntide Monday is an important holiday in this Calvinist village. The school won the battle by lowering the children's grades in behavior on the subsequent report card. Currently, as conversations and interview with children illustrated, even those who had been confirmed (after two years of religious instruction twice a week) only three weeks before Whitsuntide do not know what Whitsuntide is. Only four of the seventeen new confirmands attended church services and took Holy Communion on this occasion. Even these children went, as one child said, „because my mother forced me. It does not mean anything: I don't get any presents, must go to school, and nobody comes to visit on Whitsuntide.”

Only a few former villagers return, mostly those who live within a 30 kilometer radius from Cserépfalu. Very little out of the ordinary intra-village visiting occurs on Whitsuntide Sunday and none on Monday; villagers work in their gardens, orchards, and vineyards just as on most ordinary weekends. The only remnant of traditional Whitsuntide custom within families is a special holiday meal, similar to that served on Easter and other special occasions. Women in most households bake pastry with potatoes and cottage cheese (*túrós krumpplis béles*) and some call it, on this day, Whitsuntide's sweet bread (*pünkösdi kalács*).

In sum, Whitsuntide customs in Cserépfalu have nearly disappeared during the last two decades. Judging from the attitudes of children and young villagers, this once important custom is entering the sphere of oblivion.

All Saints' Day, or Hallowmas, is observed by most adult villagers. As in the past, village women clean the surface of their family's graves and decorate these with flowers the week before November first. They light candles and most village adults and many children visit the cemetery on All Saints' Day. In the past, however, villagers performed only the most necessary chores of the already light winter workload during the week of November first „so that the dead people's rest would not be disturbed.” Today work goes on as usual. Many ex-villagers return for at least a day on or around Hallowmas to pay respect to dead family members. In particular, older village women keep a careful account of those former villagers who still know their duties versus those who leave

home and neglect their family obligations. It is not enough „to quickly run to Cserépfalu by car and just drive to the cemetery on All Saint's Day,” as a number of former villagers have found out. It is also crucial that one is seen carrying wreaths and lowers to the gravesite and that one stops and talks about the dead and other topics within and outside the cemetery with villagers. It is also important that a former villager bring along his or her children. Although men and children visit the cemetery, it is the village women who are guardians of the dead, caretakers not only of the gravesites but keepers of the memory of the dead in Cserépfalu's consciousness, as is discussed below in the section entitled „Burial Customs.” Here it should suffice to conclude that the village customs related to All Saint's Day are very significant expressions of traditionalization and continuity. They activate networks within and beyond the village and help to articulate a sense of belonging, a feeling of community identity among adult villagers.

While villagers note that until about a decade ago, Christmas had a more encompassing, more emphasized role for a wider circle of kin, currently it is observed mainly within the nuclear family circle. Church participation, which was mandatory for all villagers in the past, involved 110, 122, and 100 people on Christmas Eve, Sunday, and Monday, respectively, in 1982.

Children under the age of 14 years are about the only ones who look forward to and enjoy Christmas. They get clothes and small presents from parents, and oranges, chocolate, and a couple of hundred Forints from their godparents. It is interesting that gift giving is very moderate at Christmas and that it is primarily restricted to those living in the household and often excludes older family members, since the giving of large and valuable presents in wider circles on other occasions became not only fashionable but obligatory in the late 1960s. In a sense, however, this is a traditional element. Older and middle-aged villagers fondly recall their childhood Christmases: the parents „obtained” a pine tree from the forests, hung it up on the beams and, as a 74-year-old woman remembers, when „we children awoke on Christmas morning that was our surprise, that was our gift. Only the rich gave candy or walnuts to their children; we never had any.”

Former villagers usually mail small Christmas gifts to their nearest family members in Cserépfalu. Only those who are still unmarried or who are married but childless return for Christmas. Regardless of how strong the affiliation of former villagers to Cserépfalu and to their natal family, after the birth of a child subsequent Christmases are spent at the new place of residence. This was the case uniformly, and none of the former villagers offered a supportable reason for staying away. Those

who claimed that travelling with small children in December, or exposing young children to village houses where there is no central heating, is potentially dangerous, also maintained that they and their families never would miss coming down to the village for pig-sticking in mid-December or always come home for István day (on the 26th of December), or János day (27th of December).

A little visiting and lots of drinking take place on the second day of Christmas between close kin, co-godparents, co-parents-in-law, and good neighbors. Most married women stay at home or visit their mothers to complain about all the cleaning, cooking, and baking in addition to their usual chores around the house and at their places of employment. Older women reinforce these complaints by comparing the empty Christmases of the present with the wonderful Christmases of the past when, as one said, „the church and the house were filled beyond capacity.”

Perhaps nothing shows the strange sense of Christmas isolation or atomization as clearly as the high incidence of television watching among children, teenagers, and men. Some 70 percent of village households have television sets. Generally, old villagers and most of the widows do not like to watch television and rarely own a set. The programs make them uncomfortable, uneasy, and anxious. For that matter, old villagers stated that they were nervous only while discussing the watching of television. Middle-aged women have a few programs which they like, but generally they just do not have time to watch more than a few hours each week and they rarely watch at Christmas. Thus, television functions in the village as an isolator year round, but particularly over the Christmas holidays, New Year's Eve, and New Year's Day.

The structure, function, and meaning of what can be viewed, for analytical purposes here, as a system of religious folk customs in Cserépfalu was discussed. This system weaves through all spheres of life. It integrates, and at the same time is an integral part of, community identity.

### *Egyházi ünnepek és identitás egy észak-magyarországi faluban*

A vallásos szokások, ünnepek köre egyike a hagyományok azon rétegeinek, amelyekben a legszembetűnőbben mutatkozik meg a parasztság törekvése az elmúlt évtizedek változásai okozta társadalmi feszültségek ellensúlyozására. Ez a tanulmány arra tesz kísérletet, hogy az élő egyházi hagyományokon belül feltárja a változások nyomait, a lassan változó külsőségek mögött kialakuló új magatartásformákat és azok kapcsolatát a faluhoz tartozás tudatával. Az itt elemzett vallásos ün-



nepeknek a helyi identitás szempontjából nemcsak mint a hagyományok egy csoportja van jelentősége, hanem azért is, mert a helyi búcsú, a húsvét, a pünkösd, a mindenszentek napja és a karácsony egyúttal a családi és közösségi összetartozás kinyilvánításának legfontosabb alkalmai, s ezzel együtt készítetnek is az év során időről időre meglazuló rokoni, közösségi kötelékek szorosabbra húzására.

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